

RESILIENCE

What is resilience?

Before entering the social sciences, the concept of resilience originated in the fields of ecology and biology: initially understood as the ability of systems to return to an equilibrium *ex ante*, it was subsequently perceived as a more dynamic ability of systems to absorb and easily adapt to changes. The notion then spread further into psychology, political economy, disaster and crisis response, development, humanitarian aid, and peace building.

In politics and international relations, resilience has been defined as a new form of governance that endorsed the impossibility of predicting threats, shifting away from the logic focused on known threats and prevention of the (post) Cold War period. When applied to societies and organisations, resilience highlights the importance of internal capacities and capabilities as way to cope with crises.

The use of the term resilience has increased in foreign policy in recent years and it is mentioned in the US National Security Strategy, UN reports on climate change, disaster-preparedness and development policy. The use of the term resilience has been preferred over the use of 'stability' due to the negative normative implications of support for maintaining the status quo in authoritarian states.

Resilience became a cornerstone of the 2016 EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), which refers to building state and societal resilience among EU neighbours as one of the key strategic priorities of EU foreign policy. Defined as "*the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crisis*", the use of resilience within the strategy corresponds with the current use of the term more widely. It also mirrors one of the key assets of democracies – the ability to reform and adjust without debilitating the system as a whole – through the transfer of power.

Nevertheless, resilience is ultimately a noun that is dependent on its context and lives by its own credo of adaptability. In terms of foreign policy however, it is inextricably linked with issues of governance at both the level of the state and societies more generally.

Key EU documents on resilience – starting from its origins in the humanitarian field

[‘The EU Approach to Resilience – Learning from Food Security Crises’](#) (2012), Commission’s Communication confirming its commitment to building resilience in crisis-prone countries;

[Council Conclusions on EU approach to resilience](#) (2013), endorsing this understanding of resilience;

[‘Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries 2013-2020’](#) (2013), bringing together humanitarian action, long-term development cooperation, and ongoing political engagement;

[‘EU Resilience Compendium – Saving lives and livelihoods’](#) (2014) illustrating how the resilience approach is being translated into reality;

[A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy](#) (2016), listing resilience as one of five key EU priorities abroad.

Resilience and Uncertainty

The future, as always, is unpredictable and the year 2016 underlined the uncertainty of modern politics. This lack of predictability accentuates the need for flexible governance in order to ensure resilience.

Political systems react differently to external shocks. Autocracies can be faster at decision-making but crucially, they are also more vulnerable to external and internal shocks as the legitimacy of an authoritarian state is bound up in its repressive nature and/or performance. Democratic governments are also dependent on performance and can be voted out of office due to poor results. Yet, that change in government neither changes the regime nor undermines the stability of the system.

In the long-term, therefore, support for adaptable, responsive government means support for democracy. This support can be seen as the best option for building resilience in line with the **Sustainable Development Goals** under **Agenda 2030**, particularly Goal 16.

The institutional set-up of a state or society conditions its ability to reform. Policy or governance reforms involve a multitude of different actors that must engage in a given process. This ranges from political parties, to civil servants, parliaments, media and civil society. Ultimately, the ability of a state or society to reform depends on the power structures and relationships of those actors and all should be involved to ensure truly inclusive and accountable institutions.

Resilience in Practice

Numerous studies show that consolidated and resilient democracies have a lower level of violence and higher living standards than autocratic regimes. (Institute for Economics and Peace, [Peace and Corruption Index](#); UNDP, [Human Development Report 2016](#))

Political Action

While stabilisation is a necessary step when dealing with a crisis, whether it is a natural disaster or a conflict, it is also important to ensure that future conflicts are managed peacefully. **Peaceful democratic societies** do not have a standard model, but there are some political and social aspects that can be taken into consideration.

- Democracy is key for ensuring that citizens are **well informed and empowered** to exert their rights in the benefit of their community. Democratic societies emphasize the importance of freedom of speech and assembly. This involves a set of tools and platforms for dialogue such as advocacy, public debates and policy development through which citizens are able to demand change and find solutions to political disagreements in a non-hostile fashion.
- **High-levels of trust and transparency** are features of both peaceful and democratic societies. Cooperation and knowledge sharing between consolidated resilient democracies and states recovering from a crisis can contribute to strengthening institutions such as parliaments and developing transparent and well-functioning electoral processes.
- The **separation of powers** is an indispensable criterion for a sustainable democratic regime. This lays the groundwork for an **independent judiciary** to develop, which serves as the main non-partisan pillar ensuring that disputes are settled under the rule of law.

Towards a resilient approach

Resilience could be seen as a new buzzword of the times, so what does it actually entail? To define resilience as an objective is tricky, yet as an approach it can enhance the potential for development and peace through:

- **Flexibility:** there are different paths to reform, as states and societies are diverse and complex, necessitating context and issue specificity;
- **Bottom-up approach:** in principle, resilience necessitates a shift from the international to national governments and communities, fostering local agency and ownership;
- **Political awareness:** without a deep understanding of the political, social, and economic characteristics of a state, resilience programming could risk reinforcing authoritarian power structures;
- **Multi-stakeholder vision:** in order to ensure resilience at multiple levels, a wide variety of actors with veto power or influence in the system in question must be included.
- **System overlap:** outcomes for different sectors (our environment, humanitarian crises) and different governing entities (the EU, its neighbours) have profound exogenous effects.

A resilient approach should therefore go beyond a technical approach to development or a narrow focus on security; it is fundamentally connected to the political system in question and the motivations and behaviour of actors within that system.

Further Reading

- Ana E. Juncos (2016): [Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: a pragmatist turn?](#) *European Security*
- Wolfgang Wagner, Rosanne Anholt (2016): [Resilience as the EU Global Strategy's new leitmotif: pragmatic, problematic or promising?](#) *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37:3
- Carnegie Europe, [Resilience as the guiding principle of EU External Action](#)
- Biscop S. (2016) [The EUGS: Realpolitik with European characteristics](#)
- Elcano Royal Institute, [A strategy for Europe's Neighbourhood: Keep resilient and carry on?](#)
- European Policy Centre, [A Global Strategy for a soul-searching EU](#)